

Drowning Risks of Children Studied

Safety: Report highlights dangers of pools to children 1 to 4. It recommends more adult supervision and fences.

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The danger of young children drowning in swimming pools was highlighted in a study to be released today, which found that among children who drown, those ages 1 to 4 are most likely to do so in pools. Older children are most likely to drown in natural bodies of water, according to the study by the American Assn. of Pediatrics.

Pool drownings have been a major concern in Southern California recently, where last month alone at least five children drowned, including a 4-year-old boy who lost his life in rock musician Tommy Lee's Malibu pool during a birthday party and a 3-year-old girl who fell into her family's La Palma pool.

In Orange County, seven children under 5 drowned from January through May. That number already exceeds the total number of pool drownings last year. Yearly drownings have averaged eight per year over the last 10 years in that county.

A 5-year-old Lancaster boy drowned over the weekend when he chased his soccer ball into a neighbor's backyard and fell into the pool.

In 1998, more than 1,500 U.S. children under age 20 drowned, according to the report. For years, drowning has been the leading cause of death among young children in California. In 1999, the latest year data was available from the state Department of Health, 107 children under 14 drowned. More children 1 to 4 drown than

from any other age group, according to state data.

The study by the pediatrics association recommended that parents pay closer attention to infants and young children when near bodies of water, install fences around pools and teach children not to swim alone.

Parents should also caution older children against using alcohol or drugs during water activities, teach them CPR and ensure that after age 5, children learn how to swim.

Compiled from the 1995 death certificates of about 1,400 children under age 20, the survey is the first to track where children drown.

According to researchers, more than half of all infant drownings in 1995 occurred in bathtubs or large buckets. For 1- to 4-year-olds, more than half drowned in swimming pools and almost two-thirds of children older than 5 drowned in fresh water such as rivers, lakes or ponds.

"It all makes perfect sense," said Dr. Sylvia Micik, medical director for the California Center for Childhood Injury Prevention in San Diego. "It's natural because of the developmental stages they are in and the environment that developmental stage allows them to be in."

She said toddlers get into everything: "If there is a way to get outside, they will find it and if the pool isn't fenced, they will fall in."

Researchers reported that the different circumstances involving each age group underscore the need for multiple prevention strategies, including more parental supervision and pools with fences.

"The most preventable of all these drowning deaths are toddlers. Putting a proper fence around the pool will prevent them from drowning," said Micik, adding that "pool psychology" in California often emphasizes aesthetics over safety.

In most of the recent drownings,

the children were alone and fell into unfenced pools or climbed into above ground pools whose ladders had been left in place.

"It's not a natural thing to be counting noses when children are in a pool . . . and [the children] will just quietly go down," said Dr. Brian Johnston, medical director for emergency services at White Memorial Medical Center in Los Angeles. Johnston said resuscitated children may suffer severe brain damage.

Though more toddlers drown than children in other age groups,

the study also indicated the need to target African American boys who drown at a rate 12 to 15 times higher than white boys of the same age.

Researchers reported that black boys may be more likely to swim in public pools with crowded conditions and limited supervision.

When children drown, parents often are left wondering if they could have done more to prevent it, said Johnston. "These cases are burdened with guilt on the part of the parents."